



Hieroglyphics: the NSU University School Literary Magazine

Volume 20 *Triptych*

Article 59

5-1-2014

The Beat

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Recommended Citation

Cary, Miranda (2014) "The Beat," *Hieroglyphics: the NSU University School Literary Magazine*: Vol. 20, Article 59.
Available at: http://nsuworks.nova.edu/uschool_litmag/vol20/iss1/59

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He remembers the music.

How could anyone forget those swaying tunes that lifted you out of your seat and into the arms of some random stranger? One minute you're sipping a martini, the next a dame's got her arms wrapped around your waist, her eyes sparkling of alcohol and breath reeking of infinite cosmos. The music had a way of snagging you with an invisible lasso and, through a kind of force beyond our understanding, dismissing all mundane thoughts and letting your legs dance to the beat of the music. He remembers that as he walks down the empty halls. He remembers the beat.

He also remembers the piano. Oh, that piano. And Simon! Who could forget him? Choruses of faceless voices would chant, "Play it, c'mon!" or "One more time!" and the old man would give in with that old, wrinkled smile of his. He'd light up a cigarette, let the smoke curls dance above his eyes, and before he'd even set down that cigarette the piano would roar into life. You never did see those hands move—you didn't want to. Making eye contact with Simon's hands revealed the whole trick of it all; the music no longer gave you that rush of adrenaline. So nobody watched Simon play, but they knew when he was playing—no other man in town could play like Simon. No man can still. He knows that.

Those girls—man, oh man, those girls. Brunettes, gingers, blondes alike came down to boogie to the chime of the piano and the pounding of the music that pulsed through every man and woman alike. It beat through them all, that confounded tune, and when Simon played he gave them the key to liberation. When those girls danced, time slowed to a crawl, and eyes roamed across lanky arms and curved hips and rosy dimples. The girls became more than just girls—their moves gave the most exotic belly dancers of India a run for their money, and those giggles made angels shy away in embarrassment. Nowadays their voices shatter the serenity like glass, and their stiff appearance scares away any fellow. He knows that.

So much changed over the years—not the faces, the people, but the beat that coursed through the artery of the place. He felt that as he came in and out of those spinning doors; there was a difference in the tempo, changing gradually as the years went on. Or was he changing? He grows older and older with each tap on the piano, his brown hair fading to gray. And maybe, maybe, the faces did change—maybe they grew wrinkled, but he never noticed, no. He didn't look at the wrinkles, or the weight, or anything like that: he focused on the eyes, and they always glistened with a youth that never died, no matter what the age had been.

But he also remembers that day. The radio boomed across the dance floor. No music played, no beat moved them—just that singular, solitary voice. He never saw a group become so transfixed, and for once he saw not people but persons, each standing there and drowning in their own worries. He wondered who had family there—sons, daughters, wives, husbands—on that island, watching those men fall from the skies. But it was so much more than that—everyone knew what was to come, the war they'd be flung into. He remembers walking on the dance floor later, but that beat wasn't the same. It didn't swing; it ticked, like a bomb waiting to go off. Everyone expected something—a letter confirming a lost family member, a bomb to be dropped over their house, a single phone call—and as they waited and thought over it those worries collected into a single ticking time-bomb that ran as the rhythm for all those years.

When it all passed, it left the place changed. The rhythm died out over time, fading out until one day, while sitting at the bar, he didn't hear it anymore. All he heard was the dull roar of the television as people both on the screen and off counted down the last seconds till the opening of the New Year. But what did the New Year matter to him? Sure, a new start, new possibilities, but he knew something had been taken from him at those moments. He knew he was losing the very thing that empowered him in an unconscious way as he made his way to and from the train station, only to sit at work and stare at piles and piles of papers. But now it was gone. So he got up, leaving the dying beat to whoever cared to pick at the remains—the buzzards that now scoured the dance floor, the sly coyote that plucked at the strings as the new music played. He'd let them have that beat, and somehow he'd find his own again.

So he goes on with his life, but he never finds the beat—not in the typewriter, not in the television, not in the whiskey or the wife or the kids or the car or the boat or anything at all. The world becomes a barren, quiet place, and he always listens for a hint of that beat, just a hint of it.

He knows, he remembers. He sees now the empty stage, a bare dance floor, yet he hears the underlying rhythm that now bubbles back up at the surface—a tap-tap-tap that resonates from not the place itself but from within. He closes his eyes, mind reaching for that rhythm, and without warning he's there—Simon's holding a cigarette in his hand, a dame's smiling one of those peachy grins at him—hell, the whole crowd is. They're all looking at him, expectant grins accompanying warm smiles. Simon waves his cigarette around with a laugh, the smoke creating a zig-zag pattern in front of his place.

"You're late to the party, champ."

He nods. He knows that.

Photo: Sunny Xu